

Gaithersburg West, a.k.a. “Great Seneca Science Corridor Master Plan”

The Gaithersburg West Master Plan that was sent to the Council by the Planning Board was deeply flawed. After months of committee and Council review, the plan has a new name (the Great Seneca Science Corridor Master Plan) and some modest improvements. However, I am still very troubled by some of the underlying concepts and, therefore, will not vote to approve it. The contention that it will create a “smart growth” live/work community is not supported by facts. The densities will require extraordinary amounts of dollars for infrastructure, with the costs borne largely by Montgomery County taxpayers. And even if those infrastructure investments happen, the quality of life for existing communities will be severely eroded because “balance” is achieved only by redefining the level of traffic congestion that is “acceptable”. Another disturbing possibility is that the area will become another set of office parks with a high percentage of non-life-science jobs, thereby undermining the intent of the master plan to create a “Science City.”

Perhaps the best example of what is wrong with the Gaithersburg West plan is the proposed development of historic Belward, a bucolic former cattle farm with gently rolling vistas. The farm was previously owned by Elizabeth Beall Banks, a retired schoolteacher whose love of the land led her to sell the farm at a gift price to Johns Hopkins University, in return for a promise that it would be developed as a campus instead of a housing or commercial complex. Shortly after Ms. Banks’ death in 2005, Johns Hopkins began proposing a far more extensive development plan than Ms. Banks ever could have imagined. Today, they are proposing a total of 6.4 million square feet of development in close proximity to existing residential neighborhoods, with buildings as high as 150’. Johns Hopkins University could and should be a positive force in the development of a world-class life sciences center. However, their actions to date reflect a desire to maximize densities – and profits – without regard to what a truly supportable and sustainable level of development would look like.

I don’t believe we need the densities proposed in the plan, particularly on Belward Farm, to establish a focal point for the life sciences. In fact, instead of concentrating the life sciences in a “Science City” area the size of a postage stamp, my vision is to encourage a “Science County” that provides more than one center for these activities.

For more more details on the Council’s consideration of the Gaithersburg West Master Plan, see

http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cs/ltmpl.asp?url=/content/council/gaithersburg_west/gburg_materials.asp on the Council's website, which has links to Council Packets and the original Master Plan as proposed by Park and Planning.